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ABSTRACT

Researchers who have focused on issues of interpersonal communication in organizations have concluded that it is an essential component of organizational life. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the communicator image of human-resource managers. A survey instrument called the Norton Communicator Style Measure (CSM) was sent to 136 Alabama members of the Society for Human Resource Management. A total of 109 managers responded, an 80 percent rate of return. Seventy-two percent of the respondents reported a positive communicator image. However, nearly 30 percent were uncertain or held a negative opinion about their personal communicator style. Future research is necessary to determine the impact of human-resource managers with low communicator images on the success of organizations. The findings have implications for all leaders, including principals, who are the instructional supervisors and human-resource managers for their schools. A principal's communicator image may affect his or her ability to attract the best teachers for the school. One table is included. (Contains 18 references.) (LMI)

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Communicator Style: A Study of Human Resource Managers

by

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Introduction

Communication studies have encompassed a substantial field of research in the social sciences. Researchers who have focused on issues of interpersonal communication in organizations have concluded that it is an essential component of organizational life. Weick (1969) wrote that the single most important function of an individual in an organization is interpersonal communication. Shockley-Zalabak (1991) also concluded that effective communication within any work setting (company or school) is necessary for the attainment of organizational goals and for individual productivity and satisfaction. For human resource professionals in particular, the ability to communicate about complex issues to a variety of people at all levels of the organization is an essential job skill.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the communicator image of human resource managers. This topic is drawn from a larger study that examined the overall communication styles of human resource managers in terms of their communicator image, gender, education level, and work experience.

Conceptual Framework

Communication Styles

Communication researchers have often considered communication style as the organizational member's most critical business behavior (Dell, 1992; Weick, 1979). Goodman (1992) reported that changes in the nature of work have had a direct impact on the workforce and on the way people communicate at work. Goodman wrote that traditional communication styles have been replaced with collaborative styles. The new challenge to management, according to Brandon (1995), is to increase employees' effectiveness by providing the information they need to help them achieve their personal and organizational objectives. Employee communication must transfer business information critical to the organization's success, and the style in which critical information is transferred greatly influences the overall success of the interaction (Weick, 1969).

Norton (1978) concluded that researchers who are interested in studying interpersonal communication theory should deal with both the content and method of communication. In developing a measure of communication styles, Norton (1983) concluded that the way in which a person communicates determines his or her self-identity

and affects others' perceptions of the individual. In addition, a person's communication style is an indicator of whether the person likes the self. With this foundation, Norton (1983) determined that communication style is a function that "gives form to content" and is a function of "consistently recurring communicative associations" (p. 19). Thus, style entails the function of giving from to content and the pattern of human interaction associated with the individual.

Norton (1978) broadly defined communication style as "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (p. 99). Paraverbal communication is a therapeutic method which has developed from the study of interpersonal communication between a therapist and a child. Paraverbal means that speech and dialogue is frequently substituted with other forms of communication such as body language and other nonverbal actions.

Communication Competence

Scholars have formed various definitions of communication competence. Stohl (1983) defined communication competence as "the ability to attain relevant interactive goals in specified social contexts using socially acceptable means and ways of speaking that result in positive outcomes with others" (p. 688). Rubin and Martin (1994) defined interpersonal communication competence as an impression formed as an outcome of a person's ability to manage interpersonal communication contexts. Cegala (1981) wrote about the relationship between cognitive development and communication competence. He defined competence as knowing how and when to use language in social settings, and as the ability to achieve personal goals without causing loss of face to self or others. Regardless of how communication competence is defined, social science scholars have claimed that it is an essential skill for effective functioning in an organization (Haas & Arnold, 1995).

Communicator Image

Communicator image is the person's perception of personal communicative ability, which is either good or bad (Norton, 1978). Identifying the communicator image of human resource professionals is important because of its relationship to self-image and confidence. Norton (1978) reported that a person who has "good" communicator image finds it easy to interact with others whether they are intimates, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Conversely, an individual with a "bad" communicator image finds it difficult to communicate with a variety of people, and may seek employment involving limited interaction with coworkers, subordinates, and peers (Daly & McCroskey, 1975).

Clearly, having the confidence to interact with a variety of people in the workplace is an essential communication characteristic for success within the context of an organization (Jablin, 1979; Kramer, 1995; Weick, 1979). Furthermore, research has shown that communicator image is especially important for human resource professionals who are functioning as change agents in organizations (Champy, 1995).

Communication Style and Communicator Image in Organizations

Communication styles of human resource professionals have been shown to effect the outcome of employment interviews. Ralston (1993) studied the impact of recruiter communication styles on applicants' satisfaction with the communication that took place during interviews. Ralston found that applicant satisfaction with the interview was a significant and meaningful indicator of intent to accept a second interview. He also reported that the recruiter's communication style was a significant predictor of applicant satisfaction. The specific communication styles characteristics which Ralston found to be positively related to the applicants' satisfaction included dramatic, attentive, and dominant. Applicants were reported to react negatively to recruiters who were argumentative.

Gallois, Callan, and Palmer (1992) conducted a study that examined the influence of candidate and interviewer characteristics on hiring decisions. They concluded that interviewers perceived assertive candidates to have better interpersonal skills than either nonassertive or aggressive candidates. They also claimed that further research is needed to explore the extent to which an interviewer perceives his or her personal communication style in a job interview to be similar to the style adopted by the candidate.

Parrish-Sprowl, Carveth, and Senk (1994) explored the relationship between compliance-gaining strategy choice, communicator image, and salesperson effectiveness and found a link to communicator image and sales success. In this study, Parrish-Sprowl et al. (1994) found that salespeople who perceived themselves as being effective communicators were more successful that those salespeople who did not perceive themselves as being effective communicators.

The above literature indicates that communication styles and communicator image are important in determining the success of interactions in a work environment. Having a positive communicator image, which is one dimension of an individual's overall communication style, is a critical attribute for employees in general and human resource professionals in particular.

Designs and Procedures

This study addressed the following research question: To what extent do human resource professionals have a positive communicator image?

Subjects

The data for this study were collected from members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) who work in the state of Alabama. Materials were distributed to SHRM members of the Birmingham and Tuscaloosa Chapters at their respective monthly meetings. Members received a cover letter, a return postage-paid envelope, and a pencil. Of the 136 members who were invited to participate in the study,

109 members participated by responding to the questionnaire either at the meeting or at a later date. 83 of the participants recorded demographic variables of gender, educational level, and length of experience. The response rate for the study was 80% and was deemed appropriate for data analysis.

The demographic data for the human resource managers were as follows: 53 female, 21 male; 11 high school, 43 bachelor's, 20 master's; 5 managers 0-1 years of experience, 15 at 2-4, 13 at 5-7, 9 at 8-10, 32 at 11+.

Instrument

Subjects completed the Norton Communicator Style Measure (CSM) which is a self-reporting tool measuring an individual's perception of personal communication style. The CSM is designed to measure 11 variables identified within the construct. The variables include 10 communicator style dimensions and communicator image. The CSM has 51 items; each is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from "NO!" to "YES!" Of the 51 items, 4 apply to each of the 10 communicator styles and 5 apply to the communicator image. The communicator styles include, dominant, dramatic, contentious, animated, impression leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, friendly, and precise.

Data Analysis and Results

Instrument and variable reliability was tested with the Cronbach Coefficient using the standardized variables. The overall instrument reliability was (.889) and the communicator image reliability was (.7).

The summary statistics (Table 1) for how the human resource professionals responded to the five questions pertaining to communicator image indicate that 72.3% of the employees had a positive communicator image. Six participants scored 15 and 17 participants scored 14 or less for a total of 27.7% of the responses in the negative and neutral categories. None of the respondents scored 5, with is the lowest score and indicates a poor communicator image. The lowest score reported was 10 which meant that one individual recorded a negative response for each of the image questions. Twenty-four human resource professionals reported that they had a high communicator image. One individual's self-perception of communicator image was near perfect, with a score of 24 out of 25.

Conclusions

Most of the human resource professionals in the study claimed to have a positive communicator image. An individual with a strong communicator image is comfortable talking to other individuals and groups. Such verbal interaction would seem important for a manager whose primary function is to hire and develop employees. Nearly 30% of the

respondents, however, were uncertain or held a negative opinion about their personal communicator style. Further research is necessary to determine the impact of human resource managers with low communicator images on the success of the organization. Specifically, these human resource professionals may not be recruiting the best candidates for their company. They may demonstrate an inappropriate or inaccurate portrayal of the company culture. Differences in hiring trends and retention of employees should be explored in terms of the communicator image of the human resource professionals involved in the hiring, training, and development of employees. Clearly, human resource professionals should be aware of their personal communicator image and its impact on their individual success and the success of the organization.

Implications for Educators

Having a positive communicator image is an essential job skill for leaders of all organizations. Principals are the instructional supervisors and human resource managers for their schools. They should be aware that their personal communicator image is reflected in their interactions with teachers, parents, students, and other school leaders. The principals' communication style directly impacts their ability to hire, develop, and supervise teachers. Specifically, a principal's communicator image may affect his or her ability to attract the best teachers for the school. School leaders should be cognizant of their communicator image and understand that their perceptions are revealed during interactions with others.

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Table 1

Communicator Image Frequency Table

Image Score	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative Percent
10	1	1.2	1	1.2
11	1	1.2	2	2.4
12	4	4.8	6	7.2
13	1	1.2	7	8.4
14	10	12.0	17	20.5
15	6	7.2	23	27.7
16	7	8.4	30	36.1
17	6	7.2	36	43.4
18	9	10.8	45	54.2
19	14	16.9	59	71.1
20	14	16.9	73	88.0
21	3	3.6	76	91.6
22	3	3.6	79	95.2
23	2	2.4	81	97.6
24	2	2.4	83	100.00

Lowest possible communicator image = 5
Highest possible communicator image = 25